

Alex Bloom

[The Arizona Republic](#)

Cpl. Nicholas Artega stood at attention with two Marines to salute one of the many color guards at Phoenix's Veterans Day celebration Wednesday.

He was one of thousands who lined the streets for the Phoenix VA Veterans Day Parade, sponsored by the Phoenix VA Health System. It was one of multiple Veterans Day celebrations throughout the Valley.

Artega, a 23-year-old Marine from Phoenix, served a year in Iraq and said the thousands of spectators celebrating military servicemen and women reminded him of why he became a Marine in the first place: to keep the country safe.

The 2-mile parade kicked off at the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center and included 109 floats, marching bands and veterans, from Pearl Harbor survivors to a Navajo code talker. Organizers claimed that the Phoenix parade was the fourth-largest celebration in the country.

Dave and Blondie Burchett have two grandsons in the armed services - a 23-year-old who served in Afghanistan and an 18-year-old who recently enlisted in the Marines. The public should not take freedom lightly, Dave Burchett said.

"They don't say thank you, they take it for granted and . . . it ain't free," said Dave Burchett, who spends winters in Buckeye with his wife.

Some people may disagree with the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, but coming out to support the troops is important, Artega said.

"They still come out and support the people who have gone, that have fought, that have had bullets flying over their heads," he said. "That means a lot to us."

Mesa

A parade down Center Street in Mesa, with the theme "Honoring Our Vietnam Veterans," included more than 90 groups that marched to honor veterans.

An 87-year-old World War II veteran, Tom McGowan, said he has been coming to the Mesa parade every year since he spends his winters away from his home in White Plains, N.Y.

"I try to make it (to the parade) every year," McGowan said as he wore his Army hat and proudly displayed his New York Assistant Fire Chief belt buckle.

Another spectator, Betsy Bunning of Mesa, whose two brothers and father are war veterans, looked out at the parade as she waited for her son to march along with the Mesa High School ROTC, one of the participating entries.

"Veterans deserve to be honored," Bunning said. "They've done a lot for us."

Scottsdale

Hundreds gathered on a grassy lawn outside City Hall for the dedication of the city's newest veterans memorial and public art piece.

The memorial is a bronze 7-foot sculpture of a World War I chaplain by Austin Deuel, who was a Marine Corps combat artist during the Vietnam War.

Scottsdale Mayor Jim Lane and U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., laid a wreath of red and white flowers at the foot of the statue to dedicate the memorial before the crowd observed a moment of silence.

Later that afternoon, veterans and their families gathered at McCormick-Stillman Railroad Park to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the French Merci Boxcar in Scottsdale. The boxcar, one of 49 in the country, was a gift from France to show gratitude for the United States' relief efforts during World War II.

Avondale

About 300 people turned out to a Veterans Day celebration in Avondale. The ceremony featured a flyover by two F-16 jet fighters from Luke Air Force Base, plenty of speeches, prayers, songs and other patriotic expressions.

Among the crowd were several generations of veterans, who should be proud of their service, said Maj. Gen. Hugo Salazar, an Avondale resident and adjutant general of the Arizona National Guard and director of the Arizona Department of Emergency and Military Affairs.

"The one constant is that they know there is a possibility that they are going to be in combat and that they are going to be asked to make the ultimate sacrifice," Salazar said. "And for that reason, I always tell soldiers it doesn't make a difference if you did or did not get the opportunity to serve in combat. Your service to this country still supports those overseas."

The crowd also shared in Navy Chief Petty Officer David McAlister's re-enlistment. McAlister, 39, a Goodyear resident, rejoined the Navy as his family and the crowd looked on.

McAlister is also a member of the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club of Arizona, a club of veterans dedicated to carrying on the legacy and traditions of the original Buffalo Soldiers of 1866, an African-American regiment of the U.S. Army. The motorcycle group participates in charitable events and seeks to preserve the history of the Buffalo Soldiers.